

NEWS ARTICLE

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by Senator Bev Hammerstrom

"My name is Sherwood and I am 10 years old. No one was watching my 4 month old brother and he drowned in the bathtub. I wish I had been there to save him." So reads the card attached to one of the many KIDPINS I have purchased from the Children's Trust Fund over the years. Stories attached to each of these pins unfortunately represent true events, and none are happy.

Imagine a childhood disease that affects one in five girls and one in seven boys before they reach 18; a disease which is completely preventable but one from which no child is immune. Imagine that this disease has the following characteristics: it can cause dramatic mood swings, erratic behavior and severe conduct disorders; it breeds distrust of adults; it is linked to increased levels of smoking, drinking and promiscuity; it increases the risk of suicide up to 10 fold; and it replicates itself by causing some of its victims to expose future generations to its debilitating effects.

Imagine what we, as a society, would do if such a disease existed. Well, my friends, such a disease does exist - it is called child abuse. Our response to this threat has been anemic at best. Funding for abuse treatment and prevention is meager, and services to abused and neglected children are among the first often to be cut during economic downturns - the same time periods when rates of child abuse often rise. Our failure to adequately address this problem is costing us dearly as a nation.

Nearly four children each day die from abuse and neglect in the United States - 1,300 each year. Children under the age of 2 are more likely to die as the result of abuse than from car accidents, drowning or fires. In Michigan, every 5 minutes a child is reported as a victim of child abuse or neglect. Last year, 75,115 complaints were investigated in Michigan. Statistics and experience tell us that many more cases go unreported.

Sadly, more than 87 percent of these children are abused or neglected by a parent, and 80 percent of the incidents take place within their home. Even sadder, the statistics suggest that regardless of age, gender, race, or family income, all children are potential victims. But, perhaps the most tragic aspect of child abuse and neglect is that the pattern continues when victims become parents themselves. Parents who were abused as children tend to inflict the same physical, emotional, and psychological damage on their children.

The Blue Ribbon Campaign began as a tribute from a Virginia grandmother to a grandchild whose battered body was found at the bottom of a canal. By tying a blue ribbon - signifying the pain and bruises suffered by abused children - around the antennae of her van, Bonnie Finney sought to raise awareness of the devastating

effects of child abuse and neglect. Since those early days in the 1980's, the Blue Ribbon Campaign has grown into a national effort to raise awareness of the scope of the maltreatment of children. While Child Abuse Prevention Month is drawing to a close, let us not forget that abuse goes on every single day.

In her book, *GHOSTS IN THE NURSERY*, Meredith Wiley opines, "Children in our nation are like the canaries miners used to test air before they went underground. How they fare is a good indication of how we rate as a society."

Abuse and neglect have serious consequences that reach far beyond the individual child and family. These children are far more likely to become involved in crime, including violent crime. Today's abuse and neglect inflicts a devastating toll on victims and society for untold years. The good news is the tide of abuse and neglect can be turned back. The best way to prevent child abuse and neglect is to support families and provide parents with the skills and resources they need. The Children's Trust Fund's sole purpose is to prevent child abuse in Michigan. What nobler cause can there be?